

Priorities in Theory and Practice of Contemporary Social Work in Russia

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Priorities in Theory and Practice of Contemporary Social Work in Russia

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Abstract

The article emphasizes a gradual transition to the postmodernist conception based not on the search of a unified complex method of solving the problems, but on a pluralistic approach to forming the theoretical and practical models for dealing with them through trans-disciplinary and risk management methodology, the method of resources activation, the method of creative development of resilience, etc. The research shows that the theory and practice of social work in Russia are gradually moving beyond the limits of social security programs based on the principle of meeting material needs. Instead, they imply formation of theoretical models and practical techniques facilitating self-implementation and independent life support of every citizen through activation of their personality potential. Further research will be aimed at the social protection of personal rights for a decent life support of a person and family under the modern digital society.

Keywords: market economy, theory of social work, trans-disciplinary character.

1. Introduction

In Russia today, the task of developing the theory of social work becomes more topical due to practical demands. The existing theoretical approaches, including those based on foreign traditions, cannot explain all trends of the modern social practice or adequately define the vectors for its development.

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New approaches to the theory of social work are needed to improve the practical professional activity under the changing society. Such national projects as 'Accessible Environment' and 'Decade of Childhood', the projects 'System of Long-term Assistance' and 'Moscow Longevity', implemented at the and regional levels, require consolidation of efforts of many specialists in various spheres, making decisions at the level of interprofessional interaction. These initiatives are aimed at address assistance to a person needing various services, development of resilience, implementation of inner resources of a person and additional potentials of the society.

The political commitment of transdisciplinary approach in the social work theory is due to the changed role of the state in rendering social assistance and support, social services to the citizens. Today, the socially-oriented profit and non-profit organizations become the participants of services market. The role of state institutions is developing towards redistribution of financial resources and coordination of the process participants (Kholostova, Malofeev, 2016).

The theory of social work in Russia acquires the features of a postmodernist conception (Borisov, 2015; Kleve, 2007a, 2007b; Kleve, Wirth, 2009; Firsov, Studenova, 2018), which manifests itself in substantiation of various social protection systems implemented by means of social work (Payne, 2015). Special attention is paid to examining the individual's resources for minimizing social risks and for dealing with difficult life situations in the context of developing personal resilience (Kholostova, Studenova, 2018).

The extensive theoretical studies on the postmodernist approach can be fully used only in conditions of an infinite expansion of the subjective basis of social work practices, with a creative approach to solving the customer's problems (Kononova, 2011) and activation of their internal potential through the techniques of assistance in self-help (Studenova, 2018).

The philosophy of postmodernism has changed approaches to the principles of social work activities (Firsov, Namestnikova, Studenova, 2012), set forth new discourses of theoretical approaches to social work and defined new ideas in understanding its mission in today's society.

2. Materials and Methods

The research objective is to consider the accents in the theory of social work, which are new to Russia and are associated with modernization of social-economic relations in Russia under market economy development. The main of such accents is trans-disciplinary character of social work, which

facilitates revealing the innovative ways of solving the social and individual problems of the present day.

The main research method is review of scientific literature of the recent decade. The theoretical discussions on social work develop in the context of the practice of today's social culture, which is determined, first of all, by the development of production and of social services market, growing rationalization, division of labour and specialization. But, on the other hand, such discussions are also conducted as a debate on relationships between the existing inequalities and the claim of the contemporary world-order model on democratization and social justice. Today's world is formed through the new models of relations and dealing with problems in the relevant social situations. In particular, since 2010 till now, the social sphere undergoes active standardization: professional standards are elaborated at state level, including those for 'Specialist in social work', 'Social worker', 'Head of social service institution' and others. At the regional level, all regions have adopted standards of social services rendering, which do not only regulate the organizational and financial bases of social servicing, but also change the ethical attitudes of the subjects and objects of the process, reinforcing the factor of personal responsibility of each of them for the efficiency of the achieved results.

Analysis of the social work practice shows that the social problems and society's reactions to them are identified and considered in the context of these models, and the current situation is characterised by integration of division, ignoring, discipline measures, control and assistance (Schilling, Klus, 2005). The attention is focused on the ideas of subsidiarity, concepts of material support and state social assistance and the possibility of developing a sense of solidarity and involvement. Methodological substantiation of these models is contained in the internationally recognized definitions of social work given by International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) on 27 June 2001 in Copenhagen; they accumulate the global experience of social work as well as benchmarks for its further development.

Development of such models becomes particularly relevant in the context of the representations of today's society that are associated, first of all, with the capitalist way of producing goods and services and reflect the accelerating process of social differentiation. Two components of this process are specifically identified (Kholostova, Studenova, 2018):

- *Functional differentiation*, which is understood as the prevailing division of the modern society into subsystems that contribute to social reproduction. All these systems are equal in importance, there is no ranking of them: economy, religion, law, education and so on. Each

subsystem has its specific properties and functions and cannot be replaced by any other subsystem.

- *Social differentiation* includes, first of all, the division of labour, the emergence of various professions, statuses, roles, groups, etc. Moreover, the development of market relations leads to an inevitable disproportionate stratification of society on the basis of income and access to basic life necessities.

Analyzing the functional and social differentiation in Russia, taking into account the variety and poly-cultural character of trends within the contemporary social development, one may come to the conclusion of the similar variety of social risks and specific problems of the needy people, which are actually impossible to comprehend and solve within a single discipline or with the limited number of methods. This methodological limitation can be overcome with trans-disciplinary approach built on transfer and summarization of ideas and methods of various disciplines. The risk management approach and social-technology approach are also increasingly significant, as well as the methods of resources activation and creative development of personal and social group resilience. This said, the area of research is of multidisciplinary character. The tools are those of sociology (a questionnaire of a recipient of social services, a statement of material-dwelling examination, etc.), psychology (tests, trainings, etc.), statistics (polling form, unified dwelling document, etc.) and other disciplines, enabling to comprehensively analyze the object and process of social work, to search for the appropriate means and techniques to meet the requirements of people. The most relevant among them are the procedures of analyzing documents, polls, observation, testing, and experiment.

3. Results

Social work can be considered to be a response to the inconsistencies of modern times caused by the processes of differentiation and related to occurrence and overcoming of social risk situations under social transformation.

In the market economy, those subjects which do not have any significant economic resources are often doomed to stay in a vicious cycle of poverty, hereditary in nature. The intensity of production, the need for rapid decision-making and the stressfulness of life situations lead to psychological problems that project the risk of diseases, deviant behaviour, various kinds of addictions, increase in the number of suicides, etc. Attempts to solve all these

problems in a traditional social way turned out to be insufficient, ineffective or rejected in the process of further modernization of society.

Therefore, at a certain stage of the market development, there is a need to institutionalize the protective function of the state – the social protection implemented mainly through the professional activities of social workers. The social assistance is legally institutionalised in different forms of social insurance or other types of organisations; they are rationally reflected, bureaucratically structured and economically and politically justified (Federal Law No 442-FZ, 2013).

Social work in Russia acquires new accents focused on address assistance to the needy; on social support with a view of broadening the specter of services for solving the vital problems of people; on organizing a system of active longevity and a system of needs-based care; on standardization in the sphere of social servicing; on involving non-profit organizations and socially-oriented business into social services rendering.

In accordance with the society's requests, in order to prevent social risks, to activate the resources and vitality of people, the social work practice is complemented by innovative techniques of social support, interprofessional teams are created to function at intersectoral level (Regulation, 2014).

4. Discussion

Professional social work emerges as a collective public response to the growing number of difficult life situations that make a decent human existence nearly impossible in a 'risk society', where the risk is understood as both the distribution of harmful consequences of natural science development and the social threats, such as unemployment (Beck, 1992). Economic and social relations both in the society as a whole and within the individual and family life-world (Thiersch, 2005) give rise to various sources of social risk, differing in degree and extent of affect.

These conditions of human existence were the main prerequisite for the emergence of various systems of social protection implemented by means of social work.

At the level of the development of society as a whole, social risks are associated with social crises, which, as a rule, arise as a reaction to economic crises. However, there is another concept of social risk, considered as the probability of occurrence of events that are incidental or independent of an individual's will and affect his/her physiological well-being and socio-economic activities. Thus, in the former case we consider social risks as an objective complex of costs of market relations; in the latter – the

consequences of market relations are aggravated with subjective risks, which can result from the economic and social crises of the society but can be also burdened with the individual difficult life situations and characterized by specific features of individual's world.

In the latter case, it is appropriate to use the socio-psychological paradigm (Beck, 1992), determining the successful overcoming of social risk factors, within which the notion of 'resilience' becomes relevant.

Resilience is defined as an integral characteristic of a person, contributing to survival in difficult situations and helping to improve social conditions that affect the individual ability to cope with difficult life situations.

The studies on resilience of the late 20th century mainly reflect the ideas of the social model that includes individual characteristics, personality traits and personal attitudes; relations with family members and peers; relationships with the society and the state (sense of security in the country, options for leisure and education); culture and its acceptance or rejection (Kholostova, Shinina, 2017). In order to analyse individual resilience, it is essential to study the correlation between the personal resources and personality strengths and potential, and the impact of social risk factors.

The issues related to social risks and opportunities for the development of human resources to neutralize them become decisive in social work (Tikhomirov et al., 2016). The role of the state is reduced to the minimal necessary financial and organizational support and legal regulation of the social support processes and the targeted measures of social assistance.

New social risks emerge with the development of market economy, and the tasks of their neutralization or positive resolution actualize the issues related to the relationship between the theory and practice of social work, with certain continuity: new ideas and approaches do not entirely reject the preceding ones, but complement and develop them. The results of empirical studies of the dynamically updated practice provide an innovative potential for the theory development. These results are mainly in the sphere of social support, accompanied residence and employment of the elderly and disabled people, as well as long-term assistance, activation and self-organization of the people older than 80 y.o. (Rimashevskaya et al., 2015; Mkrumova et al., 2017).

The theory of social work is primarily developed through accumulation, systematization and interpretation of materials obtained in practical work; development of specific theories and concepts (in the field of social protection, social assistance, social support, social services, social support for individuals and specific groups of the population, etc.); application and adaptation of the latest theoretical developments, approaches and methods of the related branches of science (sociology, psychology, economics, law, medicine, philosophy, etc.); rethinking and systematization of scientific views,

models, concepts and paradigms available in the theory of social work; formation of conceptualized answers to the challenges of modern times and the public demand. One of such models is the conception of social policy and social work of the leading religious groups in Russia (Bases of the social conception of the Russian Judaism; Bases of the social conception of the Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith; Bases of the social conception of the Russian Orthodox Church; Basic provisions of the social program of the Russian Muslims; On principles of organizing social work in the Russian Orthodox Church).

The contemporary theory of social work incorporates all the features of the postmodernist approach to science, with the introduction of a notion of 'transversality' into the language of science and the description of the modernity status in terms of pluralism, intertwining and 'rational chaos' (Welsch, 1991, 1996).

The applied character of the theory of social work is manifested in description of the course of events that can be influenced by a set of methods, i.e. by technologies.

The technological aspect is now much more often reflected in the research studies and in the practical work of social organizations.

The following main factors and reasons, determining the development of the technological aspects of social work, were identified:

- 1) social work as a kind of activity is an institution aimed to implement the main directions of social policy, assistance and support for the people who are unable or are limited in resources to provide for their living. This determines the need for developing innovative approaches and ways to solve the problems of the needy population, taking into account the available resources, experience and traditions;
- 2) the deepening economic reforms in Russia, undoubtedly, result in improvement of economic indicators, but at the same time there is an increasingly active growth of economic inequality among the population. This, in turn, requires taking appropriate political, legal and social measures aimed to create the necessary conditions and mechanisms for implementing constitutional state guarantees to ensure the social rights of citizens;
- 3) the strengthening dependence of the system of assistance and support to needy citizens on internal and external conditions: the growing economic potential of Russia and the need to search for low-cost and more effective ways and means to solve social problems, both at the state level and at the family and individual levels;
- 4) the new generation of scholars consider social work not only as an institution of assistance and support for the needy but also as a means

of shaping, developing and restoring their sociality, i.e. their ability to join the system of social relations, connections and roles. This requires further development of both methodological foundations and technological solutions;

- 5) the growth of the social work prestige at the state level and the active development of the social service system attract specialists from various fields of economy and social sphere into the sphere of rendering social services. This determines the need to develop the system of continuing education for retraining and upgrading the skills of personnel, with introduction of new educational technologies for training social workers.

The theory and practice of social work develop under the influence of various factors: global socio-demographic, political, economic and cultural processes (e.g., population ageing, increased migration flows, financial crises, economic and political instability, globalization and mixing of cultures, digitalization of economics and social sphere, etc.); rising social tensions; formation and development of state social policy and the system of social protection of the population; development of social service organizations; interaction of governmental and non-governmental organizations providing assistance to the needy people; etc.

The Russian and foreign scholars (Kleve, Wirth, 2009; Kholostova, 2014; Kholostova, Kononova, Vdovina, 2014) wrote that the social work theory originates from its practice. The ideas especially relevant for the current status of social work in Russia are reviewed below.

The modernist and postmodernist interpretation of the social work theory makes it impossible to identify any common leading or central theory of social work. The social work theory is of trans-disciplinary character. This aggravates the problem of finding an unambiguous identity of social work as an activity and field of research. This process is associated with a change in perspective, social life multiplicity and the complexity of lifestyle problems and their solutions.

At the same time, the dual nature and immanent ambiguity of social work become apparent. In contrast to classical and specialized fields of research, the social work theory does not have to deal with the problems of further differentiation of the subject field of social sciences. However, a question arises as to how a rather wide and multi-vector sphere of social knowledge, represented by many special fields of research, will be able to focus on reflecting lifestyle problems and their solutions from the viewpoint of social work.

The social work theory as a field of research transcends the traditional disciplinary boundaries; the ambivalence of opportunity and necessity

becomes its ‘trademark’; it is at the crossroads of various disciplinary perspectives, carrying out the appropriate navigation and transitions between them.

The next interesting point is the concept of social work as a profession (Kholostova, 2018): social work is an innovative profession, which is inter-professional in nature. Focusing on finding a solution to the problem, social work creates transitions between different methods. It deals with the problems that still cannot – or no longer can – be solved by the representatives of classical professions.

Just like in the case of the theory, social work as a profession has problems with self-identification. In this case, it shows relative identity, reproducing the ‘patchwork’ of various activity theories and regenerating out of them.

Moreover, the development of theory and practice of social work should also be considered from the viewpoint of scientific and political initiatives:

1. It is considered necessary to establish a trans-disciplinary theory of social work, which is important not so much as a scientific-theoretical but as scientific-political task, which is determined by socially dominant trends and results of political discussions;
2. Special educational programs should be developed (Bruner, 1996), with the aim of institutionalizing the trans-disciplinary content of the social work theory. Such programs would provide for the long-overdue need for specialists in coordination, moderation and mediation, based on various perspectives of social work. For example, it is necessary to develop such training modules as ‘theory – various types of supervision’, ‘theory – various types of mediation’, and other theory-to-practice courses.

Limitations of the present research are due to the fact that the contemporary Russian science does not distinguish social work theory as a scientific discipline. Thus, dissertations in the field of social work are usually defended in adjacent fields of knowledge – sociology, pedagogy, philosophy, sometimes psychology, economics, medicine and other disciplines. Most often this is determined by the specificity of particular scientific schools which prepare personnel in the field of social work, and not by the requirements of practice.

Practical activity also has not yet developed a unified professional domain. The professional practice of social work often unites representatives of different professions. On the one hand, this enriches the practice, on the other – it impedes achieving professional goals due to the differing professional paradigms of such mixed collectives. These problems can be solved by further professionalization of employees (including within the

frameworks of professional standards) and by the development of additional professional education for the practical workers without appropriate training in the sphere of social work.

The clarification of the scientific and professional identification of social work is also among the priorities of development of the modern Russian theory and practice of social work.

5. Conclusions

Thus, the knowledge about social work is not an end in itself, but a means to solve the problems and to develop both the one who is in need and the one who is helping. For this purpose, it is appropriate to reconcile theoretical and practical information about social work, scientific truth and professional values, traditions, innovations, technologies, etc. Such development is determined by the formation and progress of the ideas and methods meeting the needs of modern practice and encompassing the achievements of contemporary science, taking into account the pluralism of opinions when resolving social problems. The theory and practice of social work in Russia is gradually moving beyond the limits of social security programs based on the principle of meeting material needs. The vector of their development is aimed at the formation of such theoretical models and technologies of practical activity which could be implemented for the entire population, promoting self-realization and independent life support of every citizen.

The present research contributes to science by enabling to comprehend and review the scientific knowledge on many practical social issues of the modern Russian society, connected with overcoming and mitigating the consequences of social risks, globalization, and market relations. The research is also important due to the fact that it emphasizes not only the acute problems of the contemporary Russian social sphere, but also the development of innovative techniques of solving the problems of the needy, as well as improving the profession of a social worker.

The paper sets the directions for further study of the social work theory and practice under the new social reality, social differentiation and opportunities of a digital society.

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